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ABSTRACT

A study examined the distribution of home factors known to favor early reading--defined as reading English early in life--by non-native English children to whom English serves as a second language. Subjects, 216 primary school children, were surveyed by means of oral interviews. Home factors such as books in the home, parent-child reading, and book borrowing from the library and friends were found to be widely distributed in the sample. Results indicated that 81% (175) of the children had books in their homes, 77.78% (168) of the children interviewed were involved in parent-child or relative-child reading at home, and 55.09% (119) children checked out books regularly from the library or borrowed books regularly from their friends. Peer group influence was found to be most dominant among the fifth and sixth graders for the borrowing of books. Home books and home reading seem to terminate after the first and second grades. The presence of a children's book collection in the home is known to encourage early reading among children. Children who do not read at home are certainly placed at a disadvantage and teachers should make sure that such children check out books on a weekly basis from the school library or classroom book corner. Parent-child reading creates positive and encouraging attitudes towards reading books. (One table of data and one figure are attached.) (RAE)

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DISTRIBUTION OF HOME FACTORS THAT FAVOUR EARLY READING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE PORT HARCOURT CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

A random sample of 216 primary school children were surveyed by means of oral interviews to find out the distribution of home factors known to favour early reading. Early reading was viewed in the context of reading English early in life by non-native English children to whom English serves as a second language. Home factors such as home books, parent-child reading, and book lending from the library and friends were found to be widely distributed in the sample. Suggestions are made on how to reach disadvantaged children who do not have children's books at home, whose parents do not read to them at home and who do not make use of the children's library.

KEY WORDS

Early Reading

Non-Native English Children

Home Books

Children's Library Use

DISTRIBUTION OF HOME FACTORS THAT FAVOUR EARLY READING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE PORT HARCOURT CASE STUDY

Although English is the official language of instruction in schools and government transactions in Nigeria, the fact still remains that it is a second language to citizens of the country. There are over 250 languages/dialects in Nigeria and the use of English as an official language is one of the legacies of British rule in the country.

Right from the crib, the Nigerian child learns to communicate in the mother tongue by imitating the mother and other members of the family with whom the child has regular contact. As the child grows older he/she may pick up a few words of English and other Nigerian languages from play mates and contact with older members of the society. The child may infuse some of these words into his/her speech but the mother-tongue remains the dorminant language of communication. With a few exceptions, the Nigerian child learns to speak, read and write English when he enters the primary school at the age of 5 or 6.

In standard usage, "early reading" refers to pre-school reading but in this paper early reading is being viewed in the context of reading English early in life by non-native English children to whom English serves as a second language. Since this issue has never been addressed in the literature, the writers have drawn heavily on the literature of early reading in the orthodox sense in their review.

As a result of the absence of pre-school literacy programs in general in Nigeria, children at the first grade (primary one) are taught how to read by adaptation of

preschool literacy instruction models of Western Europe. The most popular approach in use in Nigeria is the synthetic approach which has several variations. In the synthetic approach the child is taught elements of reading, beginning with the English alphabet. The child is taught to sound out the letters of the alphabet and later taught to match them with words that begin with corresponding letters, such as: "A for Ant, Apple, Antelope; B for Book, Box, Boy," etc. Later individual words and letters are combined to form short sentences, such as "I have a book." This approach is often combined with finger tracing of the letters in the alphabet and in common place words such as household and class-room objects.

As the child acquires a fairly large register of words, the performationist approach is injected into his literacy acquisition learning experience. In the performationist approach, the child is taught how to read by reading materials that are of interest to and cognitive level of the child (Smith, 1982). Mother-goose rhymes and verses for primary school children such as the Vatsa's series; ABC Rhymes (1979), Children's stories and riddles in verse (1980) and A bird that sings for rain (1978) feature prominently in this approach.

By and large, the average Nigerian child learns how to read and write at the end of the first grade, while the slow learner may accomplish the same fit at the middle of the second grade or at the beginning of the third grade. While it is easy to point accusing fingers at the classroom teacher

for reading failures in the early grades at school, a point that is often over-looked is the influence of the child's home environment on reading. Several studies point to the influence of the child's environment such as home books, literate parents, home reading by parents and older siblings, ready access to children's literature and the use of the library as factors which contribute to early reading skills of children. Clark (1976) reported that early readers were read to at home on a regular basis by their parents and older siblings. Manning and Manning (1984) also reported that early readers from low socio-economic homes "have parents who believe they should help them with reading..." Parents of most early readers also read for pleasure (Durkin, 1966; Manning and Manning, 1984) and they serve as role models for reading behaviour to their children (Simmons and Lawrence, 1981).

Easy access to children's literature at home or in a nearby public library has also been identified as a contributory factor to early reading among children (King and Friesen, 1972; Clark, 1976).

Early reading has not gained much attention among Nigerian educators and researchers. Consequently there is a dearth of information on early reading among Nigerian children, the traits exhibited by them and their home environments. In order to remedy this anomaly, this study was designed as an exploratory one to probe the level of prevalence of some of the home factors which are known to favour early reading among children. Factors selected for

investigation were home books, home reading and the use of the library.

Subjects and Research Setting

A random sample of 216 primary school pupils ranging from primary one (first grade) to primary six (sixth grade) were interviewed in three primary schools and the children's public library in Port Harcourt metropolis. The sample consisted of nine pupils in each class in each of the schools selected for sampling. Thus for each school 54 pupils were interviewed. The schools selected were the University Demonstration Primary School, Choba, Port Harcourt; Sea Shell Model Primary School, Port Harcourt and the Port Harcourt Primary School, Port Harcourt. A similar number of children (54) were also interviewed at the Bernard Carr Public Library - Children's Section, Port Harcourt, based on the same principle of class stratification. The children were asked question on the presence of children's books in their homes, home reading by parents, older siblings and other relations to them and their use of the school or public library.

The children's responses were recorded on interview recording sheet and later subjected to analysis. The interviews were conducted from 15th April 1987 through 7th May 1987. The authors spent an average of 5 working days in each school/library.

RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEW

Home Books

In the first grade (primary one), 27 out of the 36 children sampled had books in their homes, while 9 had none.

In the second grade (primary two), 29 children had books at home, while 7 had none. In the third grade (primary three) 34 pupils had books at home, while 2 had none. Twenty-nine pupils in the fourth grade (primary four) reported having books at home, while 7 had none. In the fifth (primary five) and sixth grades (primary six), 25 and 31 pupils reported the presence of children's books in their homes while 11 and 5 pupils respectively reported the absence of books in their homes. The average number of books per home was 8. The above result indicates that a large majority of children in the sample have children's books in their homes and this is most likely to encourage the reading habit in the pupils.

Home Reading

Home reading by parents and elder siblings to the child was found to be wide-spread in the sample studied. Among the first graders (primary one), 30 were read to at home either by their parents, older siblings or their relations, while 6 were not read to at home. The average number of times they were read to at home per week was 3. In the second grade (primary two), 27 were read to at home, while 9 were not. The average number of times they were read to at home per week was 2.

This home reading to pupils by parents and other members of the family seem to terminate in the sample studied at the second grade level. Pupils in the third to sixth grades reported self reading but most of them also reported that they were read to at home by their parents/relations while in the first and second grades. The figures reported below for 3rd to 6th grades thus reflect home reading to the pupils as

at when they were in the 1st and 2nd grades. Twenty seven (27) of the third grade pupils were read to at home, while 9 were not read to. The average number of this activity per week was 5. Thirty-one (31) of the fourth grade pupils were read to at home, while five were not and the average number of home reading per week was 4. For the fifth grade pupils, 24 were read to at home, while 12 were not and the average number of times of this activity per week was 5. For the sixth grade pupils 29 had home reading activity with parents/ older siblings while 7 had none. The average number of home reading per week was 5.

Library Use

Children's libraries are meant to provide easy reading materials to children of various ages and different levels of cognitive development. Through the provision of simple but fascinating children's literature, children's libraries strive to capture young members of the society and instil the reading habit in them. It is therefore, of interest to know to what extent, pupils in the sample make use of libraries for the borrowing of books.

Among the first graders, 10 made use of and borrowed books from the local library, 20 did not, while 6 shared books with their friends. The average number of books borrowed per month was one book per pupil. In the second grade, 22 pupils checked out books from the library, 5 borrowed from friends, while 11 neither borrowed books from the library nor friends. The average number of books checked out per pupil was 2 in a month.

In the third grade, 27 checked out books fro.. the library, while 9 did not. The average number of books borrowed per

month was 3. In the fourth grade, 22 pupils checked out books from the library, 5 borrowed from friends, while 9 did not use any of the two sources. The average number of books borrowed per pupil in one month was 5. In the fifth grade, 16 children borrowed books from the library, 10 borrowed from friends while 10 did not borrow from friends nor the library. The average number of books borrowed per month was 4. In the sixth grade, 22 borrowed books from the library, 10 borrowed books from friends, while 4 were non-borrowers. The average number of books borrowed per month was 4. Results of the study are laid out in table 1 and figure I.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The presence of children's book collection in the home is known to encourage early reading among children (King and Friesen, 1972; Staiger, 1979). In a study carried out in Japan, it was found out that non-reading in rural areas was due to lack of books at home. This led to the "one-book-in-every home movement" in which several schools and libraries in rural areas engaged in the delivery of one book to every home. This movement led to a rise in book reading in children and adults (Staiger, 1979, p.80).

Results of the study indicate that 81% (175) of the children had books in their homes, while 19% (41) had none. The high incidence of children's books in the homes of the children is likely to foster the reading habit in the children and love for books. The children that do not have children's books in their homes are certainly placed at a disadvantage

as far as reading is concerned and something should be done to help them. A survey of this nature by the class teacher can easily lead to identification of children with this deficiency at home. Once identified, the teacher should make sure that such children check out books on a weekly basis from the school library or class-room book "corner" for home reading.

Parent-child reading at home creates positive attitudes towards books and encourages reading habit among children (Staiger, 1979). Home reading, involving parent-child, older siblings-child and relatives-child was found to be wide spread in the sample. 77.78% (168) of the children interviewed were involved in parent-child or relatives-child reading at home. This is a pointer to the recognition of the benefits of early reading among Nigerian parents. The involvement of non-nuclear members of the family such as uncles, aunts and cousins in home reading to the child is one of the several benefits of the extended family system practised in Nigeria where all blood relations are viewed as brothers and sisters while older members are viewed as parents with concommitant responsibilities. 22.22% (48) of the children had no parent-child reading experience at home. Children in this category are not likely to develop the reading habit with the same intensity as children whose parents read to them at home. Attempts should be made to reach such non-reading parents through TV book talks and made to realise the importance of reading to their young ones at home.

The use of library by children in the sample was moderately wide spread. 119 children (55.09%) checked out books regularly from the library. Some children in the

sample who do not make use of the library, borrow books regularly from their friends for home reading, while 34 (15.74%) children can be classified as non-borrowers. The wide spread use of the library in the sample is not surprising since most of the children have books at home and have been initiated into reading for pleasure in their homes through their parents or relations. It is interesting to note that friends act as surrogates to libraries in the provision of literature books to other children who do not use the local or school library. The peer group influence was found to be most dominant in the fifth and sixth grades where the children are aged 9 to 11 years.

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TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF HOME BOOKS, HOME READING AND USE OF LIBRARY AMONG CHILDREN

Class	Home Books		Home Reading		Use of Library		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Library	Friends	Non-Borrowers
1.	27	3	30	6	10	6	20
			$\bar{X}$ = 3		$\bar{X}$ = 1		
2.	29	7	27	9	22	3	11
			$\bar{X}$ = 2		$\bar{X}$ = 2		
3.	34	2	27*	9	27	-	9
			$\bar{X}$ = 2		$\bar{X}$ = 3		
4.	29	7	31*	5	22	5	9
			$\bar{X}$ = 4		$\bar{X}$ = 3		
5.	25	11	24*	12	16	10	10
			$\bar{X}$ = 3		$\bar{X}$ = 4		
6.	31	5	29*	7	22	10	4
	Sample mean = 8		$\bar{X}$ = 3		$\bar{X}$ = 4		

*Home reading as at when the child was in grades one and two.

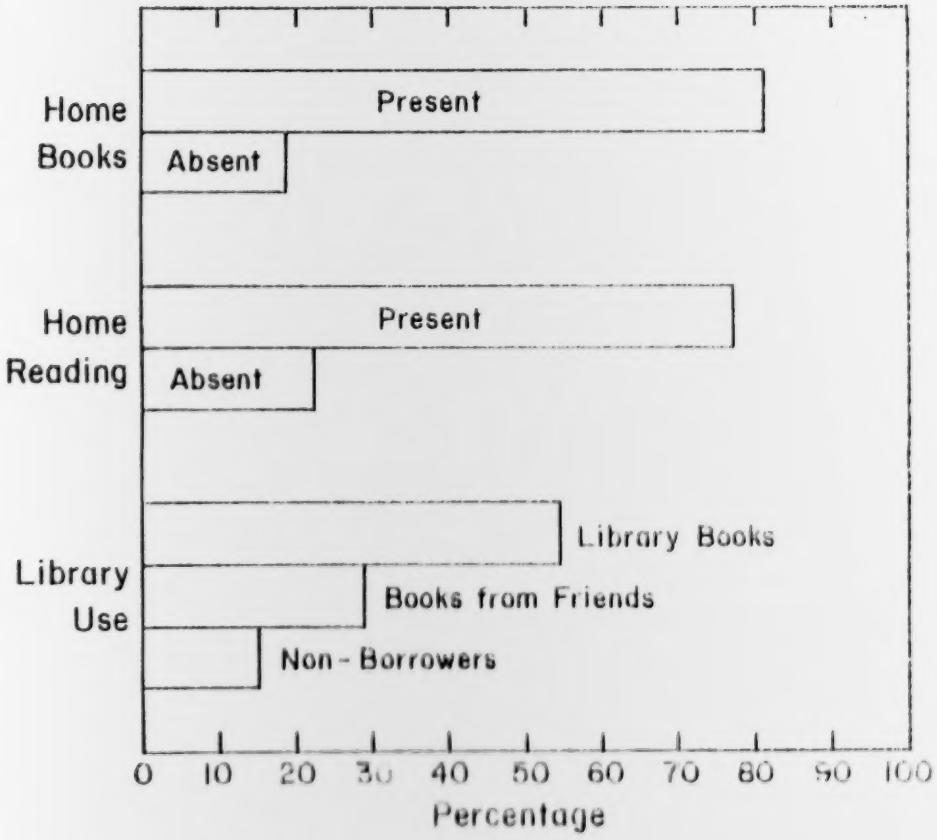

Fig. I Distribution of Home Books, Home Reading and Library Use among Children.